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English Translation Of Tanka

By H. H. Honda

SUMMARY

How to render the typical Japanese poem, Tanka, into English is a subject in which for many years I have been taking both interest and delight. And the following translations are a few examples taken from my work. All the verses here presented are from the *Manyoshu*. The longer poem, Choka, which appears in the said anthology seems to have taken the fancies of such great poets as Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro, Yamabe-no Akahito and others of the *Manyoshu*, but ceases to exist in later anthologies, the Tanka alone reigning supreme; some specimens of which are also included to render my translations, if I may be allowed to say so, more colourful.

N. B. The figure affixed to each poem indicates the number of the verse given in the *Manyoshu*. Therefore those who wish to know the original poem are advised to look it up in the Anthology.

PREFACE

Many scholars both native and foreign have translated Tanka into English. They are, to name a few, Basil H. Chamberlaine, Clay MacCauley, F. V. Dickens, William N. Porter, F. A. Lombard, Dr. Nitobe, Kenneth Yasuda, and S. Nishimura. The quintet was the metrical form in which the Tanka was rendered by some of these, while others used the quatrain.

Those who preferred the quintet divided the 31 syllables of the Tanka into five lines, namely: 5-7-5 7-7 the upper hemistich, and the lower hemistich, respectively. To cite an example (which is the only Tanka found in Dr. Nitobe's *Bushido* and translated by the same author):

Isles of blest Japan!
Should your Yamato spirit
Strangers seek to scan,
Say — scenting morn's sun-lit air,
Blows the cherry wild and fair!

This translation is to Dr. Nitobe's credit, though Dr. Wadagaki, his colleague, pointed out one blemish in the fourth line. 'Scenting' should be some other word suggestive of the effect on the eye rather than on the nose.

Now, to scan this verse, the first four lines have three feet, while the last alone

four. This irregularity of beat always accompanies this form of translation unless the rendering is done throughout in trochaic measure (which is the metre employed by William Porter in his translation of the *Tosa Diary*).

The trochaic measure, however, as everybody who has studied something of prosody is aware, is a sprightly measure, not to say, warlike. It is like heady wine lacking in mellowness, especially when it is uniformly used. A good instance of it is Longfellow's "Haiawatha".

Now, one of the Tanka's peculiarities is elegance. It is, generally speaking, like cherry-blossoms seen through vernal mist. Its nature is feminine, static, and as calm and sweet as an idle dream. That is why many ancient poets preferred composing Kanshi (Chinese verses) to writing Tanka.

To quote another example. This is from Sanetomo, the third Shogun of the Minamoto Clan; it is one of his masterpieces and against what I have just mentioned, rather masculine: a rare example testifying that the usually graceful feminine Japanese language can be transformed in the hands of a master craftsman to fit in with a most dashing and powerful verse. The translator is Mr. Kenneth Yasuda.

Ocean-waves that rush
and hurl like pounding thunder
against the rock-shore,
Break and scatter, whirl and crash
with their wild tumultuous roar!

The first line and the fourth are in trochaic measure, the number of feet in the five lines being 3, 3, 2, 4 and 3 respectively. In other words, the upper hemistich has 8 feet, and the lower 7; whereas in the above-quoted Dr. Nitobe's translation 9 feet are for the upper hemistich and 7 for the lower.

I have cited the above two examples, because I think they are excellent translations done in the quintet.

For long years I myself kept rendering Tanka in this metrical pattern. A voice in me, however, kept whispering there was something inappropriate if not wrong in this use of the quintet. For whenever I read my translation aloud, or had somebody read them for me, I would notice some hitches in them, caused by irregularities of beat.

The reader enjoys a translation of Tanka, if it is good, whether it be a quatrain or a quintet. And this is what it should be. However, the translator is not so free, because he knows that the Tanka like the sonnet is a poem of fixed form. And once he works out his method which he thinks the best vehicle for Tanka's translation, he feels obliged to stick to it. This I think is the psychology and practice of not only a translator of verses but of all craftsmen. The translations of Omar Khayyam by Edward Fitzgerald are a good example of this.

On the other hand there are scholars who advocated the quatrain. Dr. Taketomo was one of them. In his "Tanka in English Translation", he dwelled at large on

the merits of the quatrain as a vehicle for the translation.

After dealing with the nature of both Japanese and English poetry, he comes to the conclusion that the metrical form for Tanka's translation should be the quatrain.

As regards the rhyme scheme, the alternate rhyme is in his opinion the most graceful and the couplet and enclosed rhyme should be avoided. To endorse his argument he translated fifty poems from the *Manyōshū*, including them at the end of his essay. This is one of them:

Nor silver, nor gold, nor the gem
Has any charm in life's career,
What treasure could there be found in them,
More precious than my children dear?

As for me, I prefer the quatrain as a pattern for Tanka's translation to the quintet. And if I have to give reasons, the chiefest is the latter's irregularities of beat which appear almost of themselves. In my opinion poetry must first appeal to the ear. In the quatrain the flow of rhythm, if the verse is well written, is not disturbed, whereas in the quintet, as I have already mentioned, hitches in the rhythm are unavoidable unless the measure be trochaic.

The following is reprinted from part of my article which appeared some time ago in the *English Mainichi*, and with the reader's permission, I will avail myself of it to illustrate my views on this subject:—

Japanese Tanka, as students of Japanese know, are not necessarily written in five lines. They may be written in any lines less than five. They are also aware that Japanese verses, with a very few exceptions, lack rhymes. In poetry what is essential is rhythm, and rhyme is only of secondary importance; wherein lies the *raison d'être* of blank verse. Now the worst drawback in the 5-7-5 7-7 verse form lies in its too great artificiality, its too much attention to the number of syllables at the expense of rhythm. I have come to this conviction after hundreds of my own translations of Tanka. Far be it from me to detract from others' merits. All I want to say is that I have reached such a conclusion.

The Tanka, however, is a verse of fixed form. And I am of the opinion that it should preferably be translated as such. By investing it with some definite form, it will be recognized at a glance as a Tanka. But without any such form, the reader will be at a loss to know what it is. Suppose he is shown an anthology wherein some translated Chinese and Japanese verses are put together. Perhaps in most cases he will find it difficult to tell Japanese pieces from Chinese. But once the Tanka is dressed in a definite English garb, he will readily take it for such.

Now, there are lots of English verses composed of four lines with 31 or 32 syllables. Robert Louis Stevenson's "Requiem" is an example:

*Under the wide and starry sky
Dig the grave and let me lie;
Glad did I live and gladly die,*

*And I laid me down with a will.
This be the verse you grave for me:
Here he lies where he longed to be;
Home is the sailor, home from sea,
And the hunter home from the hill.*

The first stanza has 31 syllables, while the second 32. The following stanzas composed by A. E. Housman are all in 31 syllables:

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now
Is hung with bloom along the bough,
And stands about the woodland ride
Wearing white for Eastertide.

Now, of my threescore years and ten,
Twenty will not come again,
And take from seventy springs a score,
It only leaves me fifty more.

And since to look at things in bloom
Fifty springs are little room,
About the woodland I will go
To see the cherry hung with snow.*

Each stanza is made up of iambic tetrameter, excepting one line which is trochaic with the same feet. After efforts extending over long years, I have come to believe that this is an ideal mould for recasting Tanka. The following is a piece of Tanka translated in four lines with 32 syllables by Hidesaburo Saito:

*I look out o'er a tangled mass
Of cherry's bloom and willow's green;
The metropolis is in spring
A rich brocade of brilliant sheen.*

If you replace the word metropolis in the third line with 'capital', and insert 'the' between 'in' and 'spring' of the same line, the verse will be in perfect four feet. Saito was a great scholar of English. But to err is human. And he must have mispronounced the word metropolis. Save for this blemish this is a fine translation worthy of his parts and scholarship.

To translate either prose or verse is not easy. And we must admit the translator's lot is hard without his being snubbed. All translators may be said to be in the same boat. They, therefore, might do well to sympathize with one another. On the contrary, some of them are more against their poor fellow-workers than otherwise. Another noted Japanese scholar, himself a translator, criticizing Arthur Waley's translation of the "Genji Monogatari", said it was full of mistakes without so much as taking into consideration its literary merits. It was as if mistakes were this man's sole concern. No one could be perfect. If he is so interested in finding fault with others' mistakes, the wisest thing for him to do is not to make mistakes

himself lest he should incur the same fate. To be frank, I, for one, much prefer a good translation with mistakes to a bad one without mistakes. A good translation with mistakes does less harm to the original than a bad translation with few mistakes. For the reader can recognize and enjoy something of the beauty of the original work through the former, whilst the latter only leads him to consider that the original is not worth while to read.

It is said of Oscar Wilde that in conversing in French he now and then intentionally used some phrases that sounded a little queer to his French friends, so that he might enliven his brilliant talk with a touch of exoticism. No Japanese could mistake the old courtier, Sone Yoshitada, for a priest. But this is what William N. Porter did in his translation of an anthology of Japanese poems called "Ogura Hyakunin Isshu," because many of the poets whose songs appear in the anthology are 'So' or priests. He erroneously split the family name Sone in two, and wrote Priest Ne. Some people may think this is a matter for mirth. But when I came across this mistake, I could not but feel a deeper respect for him; for it was a kind of mistake only foreigners could make. With such a handicap Porter overstepped a barrier of language, and did with painstaking efforts open a new window for the Western world. Marcus Aurelius says something to the effect that the wrinkles of bread are not made on purpose by the baker. They are inevitable, yet they add much to the appetizing look of bread.

As a very few exceptions, some translators were born under lucky stars. Edward Fitzgerald is one of these few. All lovers of poetry enjoy reading his translation of Omar Khayyam. They admire it, struck by the beauty of the thought and style. The content was there offered by the Persian poet for the translator to render into English; so was the style. If you read the original verses, you will readily perceive that any translator would have rendered them as Fitzgerald did: in four lines in iambic pentameter, employing the same rhyme scheme. The following is the first stanza of the "Rubaiyat" (Four-line Verses):

Amad sahre nadas mi khana-e-ma
Kay rand khrabi diwana-e-ma
Bar khez ki par kunim paimana zamy
Zan pish ki par kunim paimana-e-ma

Setting aside the meaning, you can conceive the flow of rhythm, counting the number of syllables in each line together with the rhyme. I am the last either to disparage Fitzgerald's subtle artistry or to appraise him lowly, but I think in the realms of gold, few were as fortunate as he in hitting upon such veins of ore. Four-lined stanzas of iambic pentameter are not uncommon at all in English poetry, but this particular rhyme scheme renders the translation of the "Rubaiyat" unique in English literature. It is not easy to learn a language, but Fitzgerald was more than rewarded for his study of Persian.

However, this is seemingly not the lot of a translator of Japanese verses. It is

not easy for him to find out a good vessel into which he can pour out his wine. But I seem to have discovered a really fine vessel in the above quoted A. E. Housman's verse. At least here is one solution to this difficult problem. Let me show you as poor specimens here a few pieces from among my translations.

The following are two translations of the same swan song by Goemon Ishikawa, the most notorious burglar in the criminal annals of Japan, sung just before he was executed. He wove his name Ishikawa, meaning "Stone River" into the song.

*The sands may all be
Swept clean away from the bed
Of the Stone River,
Yet the world shall never see
The stock of thieves cease to be.*

*Though the sands may cease to be
On thy bed, O thou Stone River,
Us robbers shalt thou never see
Vanish from the world, ah, never!*

The second translation is in trochaic measure except the third line, employing feminine ending in the second and the last line. These two translations of the same verse are the same in the number of syllables, but rhythmically they are very dissimilar. And I believe that the quatrain is more adapted to the English ear.

The only objection I can think of now to the quatrain as an independent verse form is that it lacks something of completeness. In other words, it is too brief to be a fit vehicle for poetic utterance. Says Prof. Kochi Doi, "Quatrains seem to have been founded on dancing rhythm. The rhythm of one quatrain must be continued to another, and it will be difficult to make a single quatrain complete in itself." The verses quoted above from Stevenson and Housman will endorse this opinion of Prof. Doi's, but this is only one side of the coin. In Walter Savage Landor's swan song, to cite only an example, you will see the other side.

*I strove with none; for none was worth my strife.
Nature I loved, and next to nature, art.
I warmed my hands before the fire of life.
It sinks, and I am ready to depart.*

No one will deny that this is a quatrain complete in itself. And almost each and every quatrain of the "Rubaiyat" is such a good example as can well be regarded as an independent verse. And perhaps just as the "Rubaiyat" made itself unique by its form and marvellous rhyme scheme, so the Tanka translated in a quatrain will make itself all the more enjoyable by its being an independent verse.

No. 1

SONG

The Emperor Yuryaku (418—479)

O Maiden gathering
Young herbs upon the hill
On this day of spring!
Thou dost thy basket fill,
Culling the herbs alone,
Trowel in hand. Tell me
Thy dwelling and thy name.
I rule this Yamato,
Sitting upon the throne.
Now I will let thee know,
For, Maiden, I love thee,
My name and whence I came.

No. 2

SONG

Written by the Emperor Jomei (593—641) on
the occasion when he stood on Mt. Kagu
contemplating the country lying below.

Though there are many hills in Yamato,
The loveliest of them seems indeed to be
Mt. Kagu, on which now I stand to see
The lying plain. The wreaths of smoke rise there
From houses, and the gulls fly in the air
Over the lake in flocks. Methinks there is
No land like this — so fair, and fraught with bliss!

No. 13

THE CONFLICT OF MOUNTAINS

The Emperor Tenchi (626—671)

Wishing Mt. Unebi to take to wife,
Kagu with Miminashi fell in strife:
So even in the Age of Gods, alas,
Those mountains had to fight to have a wife.
Then could we shun this same lot in our life?

No. 22

As stony-bedded rivers where
No grass can ever grow, so may
Thy Highness be so young and fair,
Remaining as thou art for aye!

Fuki-no Toji (7th Century)

No. 27

How fair the hill of Yōshino
Where folks of old were glad to go!
Look, therefore, at the hill full well,
Of which the ancients used to tell.

Emperor Temmu (631—686)

No. 28

Spring is already gone, and now
It seems the summer's come, for lo,
All white is yonder Kagu's brow
For robes aired lying row on row.
The Empress Jito (645—702)

No. 48

Toward the east upon the plain
The dawn; and looking back, I now
Behold the setting moon remain
Over yon western mountain-brow.
Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (7th Century)

No. 54

By the stream standing would I see
In spring the sight of Kose's Lea
Where the camellia-flowers blow
Upon the hillsides row on row!
Sakato-no Hitotari (7th Century)

No. 63

Written in China yearning for home
Let's hasten, Comrades, home to go
To see our friends in Yamato
And those old pine-trees too that yearn
On Mitsu Beach for our return!
Yamano-e-no Okura (660—733?)

No. 67

If on my solitary way
I should not hear the plaintive lay
From a love-whispering snipe, I
Pining alone for love shall die.
Takayasu-no Oshima (7th Century)

No. 71

O listen, Cranes! Why do you cry
Above the shoal so heartlessly,
When yearning for my home I sigh
And sleepless all alone I lie?

Osakabe-no Otomaro (8th Century)

No. 75

How chilly blows the morning wind
Over the mountains coming down,
And I a traveller can not find
A maid who lends to me a gown.

Prince Nagaya (684—729)

No. 76

The wrist-guards of yon archers ring:
Shields set on end are in a row,
And every soldier's practising,
Led by their captains, with the bow.
The Empress Genmyo (661—721)

FOUR SONGS

No. 85

How many days have passed by
Since my Sire left home to roam!
Now to the mountains shall I hie,
Or wait and wait for him at home?
The Empress Iwa-no Hime (—347),
Wife of the Emperor Nintoku

No. 86

Better upon the rocky bed
In the high mountains to be dead
Than ever for my love to yearn,
Waiting in vain for his return!
Ascribed to the Empress Iwa-no Hime,
but not certain

No. 87

Fain shall I wait, and waiting, bear
Until the end, Sire, of my time,
And see my waving raven hair
No more black, but all hoar with rime!
The Empress Iwa-no Hime (—347)

No. 88

The morning fog will disappear
From autumn fields with ripe ears blest,
But oh, when will my trouble clear
Off from my miserable breast?
Ditto

No. 95

O I have won the maiden fair,
And Yasumi the world did court
Is mine. Of no words I'm aware
To tell about this miracle wrought.
Fujiwara-no Kamatari (614—669)

No. 103

Sent to Lady Fujiwara

Oh, such a heavy snowfall here!
Do you not feel much envy, dear,
Who only of its rumour hear
In distant Ohara town drear?
The Emperor Temmu (631—686)

No. 104

Reply to the Above

Why boast, my Sire, so of your snow?
'Tis what I prayed for, you must know,
To our God of the Hill, and oh,
So slight a fragment of our snow!
Lady Fujiwara

No. 208 & 209

Elegy

Oh, in the mountains where is she
Among the red leaves wandering?
If only I had means to see
Where she could now be loitering!

The maple-leaves are falling fast,
And oh, so sad a news I get,
Which takes me back to those days past
When under the like leaves we met!
Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (7th Century)

No. 211 & 212

Elegy

The moon is shining bright this night, —
The self-same moon I viewed last year,
But oh, the days have passed to blear
My cherished memory of her sight!

Alone as I retrace my way,
From her tomb on the mountain drear,
All things in life to me appear
Sad and forlorn as on that day!

Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (7th Century)

No. 228 & 229

Elegy

Written in the fourth year of Wado on
seeing the dead body of a drowned maiden
in the pine grove of the Isle of Hime

Let your name remembered be
For ever till the pine-trees small
On Hime Island grow to see
Hoar lichen cover of them all!

Let the tide never ebb and leave
The Naniwa Lagoon adry
For on its bottom would I grieve
To see the maiden drownèd lie!

Kawabe-no Miyahito (8th Century)

No. 235

Written on the occasion when the Empress
Jito went up Ikazuchi-no Oka (Hill of
Thunder)

A goddess is Her Majesty,
So upon this Hill of Thunder,
Behold, she sojourns with the sea
Of Heaven's clouds extending under!

Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (7th Century)

No. 238

Still and serene the Villa stands
But here is heard the seiners' roar
Seeking for workers' helping hands
To draw the fishing net ashore.
Naga-no Okimaro (8th Century)

No. 245

How noble Mizu Isle and fair!
And oh, what island can compare
Its beauty with this isle divine,
True to its reputation fine?

Prince Nagata (—737)

No. 247

Even though the billows roar
Elsewhere along and off the shore,
About your ship may no wave rise
In what port she at anchor lies!

Lord Ishikawa (8th Century)

No. 265

Heavy falls the rain and drear,
And not a house do I behold
About the ferry crossing here
At the lone cape of Miwa cold!

Naga-no Okimaro (8th Century)

No. 266

O Plovers, how this eve your cries
On the waves raving in the lake
Bring back the bygone memories
To me to cause my heart to break!

Kakinomoto-no Hitomaro (7th Century)

No. 267

A flying squirrel rashly sought
Higher to flit, and higher still,
And in no time was found and caught
By the old huntsman of the hill.

Prince Shiki (—1056)

No. 268

Do you not hear the plovers mew?
Waiting for you, my friend, they are,
To see you back at Asuka,
Home again to welcome you!

Prince Nagaya (684—729)

On Mt. Fuji

Since heaven parted from the earth
 Mt. Fuji has been domineering
 In Suruga, serene on high.
 When I behold its brow, I see
 Even the sun go ever shadowed,
 Even the bright moon ride obscured;
 The white clouds dare not pass its front,
 Nor does the snow cease there to fall.
 Oh, let us talk on of this peak
 Peerless, majestic, and divine!

Envoy

From Tago Beach I view the sight
 Of Fuji's high brow and serene
 Covered all over with the white
 Of the snow falling there unseen.

Yamabe-no Akahito (c. 684—c. 736)

Mt. Fuji

Behold Mt. Fuji yonder in the sky
 Lording it o'er the provinces of Kai
 And Suruga, and even clouds hang low,
 Afraid to pass before its lofty snow;
 And birds upon their pinions dare not seek
 In awe to wander near its sacred peak.
 The snow-flakes struggle to subdue the fire
 Which rises from the rugged craters dire;
 The flaring fire fights back to melt the snow,
 O let me pray to thee in weal and woe!
 Lake Seno-umi looking like the brine
 Lies at the foot of this high peak divine.
 The river o'er which people come and go
 Originates up in its virgin snow
 And foamingly runs over rocks and sand.
 Art thou a spirit, pray, that guards this land
 Of Yamato, or didst thou but appear
 To bless us as a treasure-mountain here?
 O noble Mountain, never shall our eyes
 Cease thee to contemplate with ecstasies!

Envoy

Holding in awe Mt. Fuji high,
Even the clouds of heaven lie
Hanging before it streamer-wise,
Afraid to pass there in the skies.

Ascribed to Takahashi-no Mushimaro (8th Century)

No. 328

Like flowering cherry-trees ablaze
Exhaling fragrance soft and sweet,
Nara the Capital now displays
Her vernal splendour so complete.
Ono-no Oyu (689—737)

No. 330

Wistarias blooming everywhere!
And do you not now from your place
For this our town of Nara care
Where they are seen in all their grace?
Ohtomo-no Yotsuna (8th Century)

No. 337

Goodbye, friends, for my children dear
Perhaps are crying now, I fear,
And their fond mother giving ear
To hear my footsteps drawing near.
Yamanoe-no Okura (660—c. 733)

No. 338 to 350

13 Songs in Praise of Wine

I

No vainglorious thoughts I prize,
But drinking thick wine to the eyes
From vessels of a goodly size,
Is what above all I advise.

II

I admire those ancients wise
Who could for wine a name devise
And called it sage that, in this guise,
They might to the occasion rise.

(The allusion is to the drinkers of ancient China. Once a Chinese emperor forbade his subjects to drink wine. So the

folks could neither drink nor speak openly of wine. But they had the wit to call it 'sage.' And whenever they wanted to take wine, they probably said, "Now let us go and see our sage.").

III

Even the seven men of yore
Loved drinking, and did wine adore.
Nothing pleased those wise men more
Than to possess of wine a store.

(The Seven Wise Chinese of the Bamboo-Grove are well known in Japan, and have often been the theme of poetry and painting)

IV

Better bowls of wine to drain
And stark drunk cry than wit to feign;
For greater joys I rack my brain
To find my effort all in vain.

V

Well do I know that none can try
Wine and its worth to praise too high;
Its virtue wine will ne'er belie,
Neither treasures can defy.

VI

Were I not a man, then ask
I would to be of wine a cask;
Then sweet indeed would be my task
To drink my wine in such a mask!

VII

Ugly indeed are they who feign
Wisdom, and from wine abstain!
Look at their faces. Are they sane?
They but resemble monkeys vain.

VIII

Better to have a cup of wine
Than gems however rare and fine!
The greatest pleasure 'tis of mine;
Methinks it is indeed divine.

IX

Better to drink to take delight
In this our life and act aright
Than be rich in jewels bright
That sparkle in the dark of night!

X

The best of pleasures here below
Is for us to drink, and so
More than intoxicated grow,
And crying, let tears freely flow.

XI

If in this world well can I fare,
My after life I little care.
I fain would be bird of the air,
Or worm, and what should I not dare?

XII

We mortals who are made of clay
Must willy-nilly go the way
Of all. So fate will I obey
And dare enjoy life while I may.

XIII

Pray, your vanity o'ercome,
And, if you choose, to wine succumb,
Or drinking, weep; but ne'er be glum,
Nor trying to look wise, be dumb.

Ohtomo-no Tabito (676—731)

No. 351

To what this life shall I compare?

'Tis a boat which at peep of day
Starting, leaves no traces where

Upon the waves she made her way.

Sami Mansei (7th Century)

No. 378

Desolate does the pond appear
Where Time has left his traces drear,
And only water-plants are seen
Beside its shores to prosper green.

Yamabe-no Akahito (c. 684—c. 736)

No. 392

Love Songs in Metaphor

Why did I leave unplucked that eve

The plum-spray which I chanced to meet

To have my heart now keenly smart,

Calling to mind the flowers sweet?

Ohtomo-no Momoyo (8th Century)

No. 400

The sweet-plum blossom blowing fell,
So do I hear all people tell,
But may what I marked as my own
Still be safe and has not gone.

Ohtomo-no Surugamaro (8th Century)

No. 431

On a Maiden's Tomb

Long, long ago here lived a young man who
Had a new cottage builded, it is said,
And with a new striped hempen sash begirt,
The lovely maiden, Tekona, did woo;
And here her grassy grave is said to lie,
But is it for the cypress-leaves so dense,
Or is it for the pine-roots overspread,
Because so many years have passed by thence,
Nowhere can I come on the maiden's tomb:
All save her tale veiled in the forest gloom.

Yamabe-no Akahito (c. 684.—c. 736)

No. 439

The time has come now home to go.
But in the capital I shall know
I have her sleeve, alas, no more
My head to pillow as of yore.

Ohtomo-no Tabito (676—731)

No. 447

Never the juniper do I see
On Tomo's Beach, but I in gloom
Think of my dear deceased with whom
I once beheld the self-same tree.

Ditto

No. 452

Now tall and leafy is the tree
She and I planted with delight,
And grand our garden, but oh, she
No longer can enjoy their sight!

Ditto

No. 453

When our old plum-tree I behold
I find my heart forlorn and drear.
I cry to think in days of old
By her this tree was planted here.

Ditto

No. 457
My lord, since thou I wished to serve
For ever art laid in the tomb,
Gone it seems are my heart and nerve
And left behind I live in gloom.
Kon-no Myogun (8th Century)

No. 458
Since he is gone, I all alone
All day and night my lord deplore,
And like a child naive and wild
I crawl about upon the floor.
Ditto

No. 464
The pinks are flowering in the garden
Which my love planted for me there.
Now summer passes into autumn,
And they, alas, are flowering fair.
Ohtomo-no Yakamochi (718—785)

No. 465
Life I know is ephemeral,
But as the dreary autumn wind
Comes coldly blowing over all,
My dear deceased comes to my mind.
Ditto

No. 468
Oh, if I only knew the lane
Which to the other world would lead,
I'd set a barrier to detain
And bring back home my love indeed!
Ditto

No. 472
Though 'tis the common fate, I know,
Of man to die, still I can not
Be reconciled to this my lot,
And ever is my heart in woe!
Ditto

No. 473
Never I see a mist that hangs
Over Mt. Saho's brow but I
Recall my wife, and by the fangs
Of grief stung ever do I cry!
Ditto

No. 474

To me Mt. Saho once was strange:—
How time goes by and all things change.
Now for the mountain do I care,
For there my wife's grave lies for e'er!

Ditto

No. 506

My lord, do set your heart at ease!
If there should be emergencies,
Together I will go into
Fire and water fain with you.

Lady Abe-no Iratsume (8th Century)

No. 507

Deep is my love for you, so deep
That my tears running from the pillow
I sleep afloat as on the billow,
Crying hard even in my sleep.

Suruga-no Uneme (8th Century?)

No. 512

Even so innocent an act,
Oh, as our love-tryst will attract
The eyes of folks, and us to bore
Their scandalous tongues wag evermore.

A Country Maid

No. 514

My lord, so deep my love for thee,
That with each stitch I gave with care
It went into thy robe, and there
Ever dwelling shall it be!

Lady Abe-no Iratsume (8th Century)

No. 515

To Lady Abe-no Iratsume
While I was fast asleep wayworn
To my chagrin the sash was torn,
And what to do I, unaware,
Did only cry and tear my hair.

Nakatomi-no Azumabito (8th Century)

No. 516

In Reply to the Above

To hear your sash was torn, how sad!
Were I there where you're sojourning,
For you to mend it I'd be glad,
Using my thread, a three-ply string.

Lady Abe-no Iratsume (8th Century)

No. 521

Oh, keep me in thy memory,
A poor maid of the east who mows,
Spreads, and dries the hemp that grows
In the fields, thinking e'er of thee!

By a country girl, probably a singer, to send off
Lord Fujiwara-no Umakai who on the expiration
of his term of office in Hitachi Province was
about to start for the capital (7th Century)

No. 525

Come, though it be once in a year,
Astride your steed, the jet-black horse,
Crossing the Saho River clear,
Over stones lying in its course.
Ohtomo-no Iratsume (—728), Wife of Tabito

No. 526

As rippling waves are ever seen
On Saho's rapids where above
Plovers we hear, so day and e'en
Love never ceases me to move.
Ohotomo-no Iratsume (—728)

No. 527

Many a time you broke your word
To come to me. Now I reply
To your intention I have heard
I shall not wait, for why should I?
Ditto

No. 528

The mouth of Saho's stream is wide,
Where only plovers' cries we hear,
But I will have men span the tide
For you to come to me, my dear.
Ditto

No. 556

From Tsukushi no ship's yet come
To carry you away from home,
But oh, how sad you to behold
Already querulous and so cold!

Princess Kamo (8th Century)

No. 571

Look, how pretty is the moon!
And hark, how sweet the river's tune!
So, let us all who'll stay or leave
For home enjoy enough this eve!

Ohtomo-no Yonawa, an official in the local government
of Kyushu instituted to guard the coast-line (7th Century)

No. 594

Like the pearly evening dew
That does upon our grass-leaves lie,
Languishing in my love for you,
Oh, how I wish as soon to die!
Kasa-no Iratsume (8th Century)

No. 595

Never shall I forget you, love,
While yet in this our world I move,
And daily shall my love grow too,
Ever to you remaining true!

Ditto

No. 596

Think you not, Keeper of the Isle,
The waste of sands one spends above
Eight hundred days' toil is a mile
Of walk beside my passionate love?

Ditto

No. 588

Do we not sigh in love and die?
And every month by day and night
Unknown I peak, and gowing weak,
I shall soon perish in my plight.

Ditto

No. 670

Come in the moonlit night serene:
The way is short and even too,
And there no mountain lies between
To make your visit hard to you.
Prince Yuhara (8th Century)

No. 671

In Reply

Even though the moon shines clear,
My night within is dark and drear,
And how can I your dwelling find
In this my inward darkness blind?
Anon.

No. 683

How foul the folks' tongues in this place!
So even though you pass away
From anguish, never in your face
Your secret thought of love betray.
Ohtomo-no Iratsume (—728)

No. 684

What care I if I cease to be;
For though I live on in this life,
You never will send word to me
That you will fain have me to wife.
Ditto

No. 711

How much I love you you're aware.
So never me to leaves compare
Wafting upon the waters where
Mallards are swimming free from care.
Taniwa Ohme-otome (8th Century?)

No. 712

Oh, is it for that sin of mine,
That touching of the cedar-tree
Held by the Miwa's priests divine,
That you at all can I not see?
Ditto

No. 713

Oh, does he mind the rumour spread
Which separates us like a fence,
Or is his mind to shun me led
To use it as a mere pretence?
Taniwa Ohme-otome (8th Century?)

No. 714

To A Maid

I really hold you dear, my lass,
But with no opportunities
For love-trysts do I live, alas,
Longing alone, and heaving sighs.
Ohtomo-no Yakamochi (718—785)

No. 721

To The Emperor

I ask your pardon on my knees
For this my gift, for I abide
Upon the lonely mountain-side
A stranger to urbanities.
Anon.

No. 722

I wish I were a stone or wood
Which no afflictions ever move!
For day and night forlorn I brood,
I suffer, for my thoughts of love.
Ohtomo-no Yakamochi (718—785)

No. 723

To Ohtomo-no Sakano-no Oiratsume, Wife to Yakamochi

My daughter saw me off when I left home,
Standing beside the iron-studded gate,
Sunken in thought, with face disconsolate,
As if I went in foreign lands to roam.
Now but of her I think both day and night,
And so emaciated I'm become;
And sodden are my sleeves in sorrow deep.
Alas, if I be thus, how can I sleep
Or live a single month out of her sight?
Her Mother, Ohtomo-no Sakano-no Iratsume,
Sister of Tabito (8th Century)

No. 724

Oh, does my daughter pass the night,
Her mind confused as hair at morn?
For in my dream I see her sight,
And anxious am I and so lorn.
Ditto

No. 728

Oh, if there were a country where
Nobody lives, I will go there
Together with you well to fare
Alone, content, and free from care.
Ohtomo-no Yakamochi (718—785)

No. 732

If for your sake, will I not bear
A thousand rumours debonair?
And should it fall upon my chance,
I'll lend myself to your romance.
Ditto

No. 734

O that a priceless gem I were!
Then I should not be sad and lorn,
But be upon your arm so fair,
Living with you both night and morn.
Ditto

No. 771

To Ohtomo-no Sakano-e-no Oiratsume
You're aware when folk deceive you,
They do pretend to tell the truth.
Therefore, how can I believe you,
On hearing me you love in sooth?
Ditto

No. 1740

The Young Man of Urashima
A Narrative Poem

When I stroll on a hazy day of spring
About the shore of Suminoe Cove
The sight of fishing boats ne'er fails to bring
To mind the distant bygone which I love.

* * *

A lad of Urashima went to roam,
Proud of his skill bonito, bream to take
For seven days he sailed away from home —
Over the ocean looking like a lake,
When he came on a maiden sweet and fair.
This young girl was a goddess of the sea.
He talked and talked with her and lost all care
Except to wed her. So the boy with glee
Married the maid; and in the Palace there —
In its grand chamber in superlative
Joy and delight they led a life so rare.
And so it might have been his luck to live
Happy and all free from age and death;
Had not the folly of the worldly lad
Led him to tell his bride with bated breath
That he must leave her for some time, though sad,
To see his parents and with them to speak.
But he would come back very soon, he said.
At this the bride spoke with a manner meek,
If he desired to come back to her bed —
And truly wished to live again as now —
Not to unclothe the case, her gift of love,
She earnestly implored; he gave his vow.

Now when upon the old shore of the cove
Our youth stood, not a house could there be seen,
Nor yet the near-by village well he knew.
In his surprise, before the puzzling scene,
The boy considered it was but a few
Summers he'd been away. What was amiss?
If he but looked into the box, could he
Not find his home again and feel its bliss?
So thinking, he half opened it to see
The secret, when all suddenly he saw
A thick white cloud appear, curl up, and flow

Horai-ward. Crying he stood up in awe
And waved his sleeves, — ran, stumbled, fell, and lo!
Writhing the poor wretch fainted presently.
His skin was now all wrinkled, and his hair
Jet-black before, now white as white could be;
And his faint breath expired then and there.
The end was come: there lay the body cold.

* * *

I see the village where he lived of old.

Anon. (8th Century)

No. 3270

Song of Jealousy

In that her hovel I desire to burn,
Upon the dirty mat fit for the rake,
And on her greasy arm I wish to break
You must be lying, — you for whom I yearn
And keep indoors though bright the sun may shine,
For whom the livelong night forlorn I whine,
And till the flooring creaks in bed I turn!

Anon. (8th Century)